



Spiral-Bound



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Chapter 1 by MJZ

They tell me Noah is the most popular name in the western world. That's why I choose it when I introduce myself; it makes me that bit more forgettable.

'Noah.' I answer simply when the inevitable question comes.

'Oh I have a nephew, Noah.' An inward smile. I don't let it creep onto my face, not even into my eyes: image is everything.

'Nice kid?' I ask, adjusting my watch at the same time to give the impression I'm bored in this company.

He proceeds to jabber about little Noah in impressive depth, given that he's an uncle rather than a father. Not a single relative knows where I am at this point.

'...but of course all kids go through that kind of emotional turmoil at some stage.'

I pull back my sleeve to reveal my watch again; partly for his sake, partly mine. He needs to be reassured that I'm a distant character, unlikely to be forthcoming with conversation. I need to know when it's too late for the client to back out. Three minutes.

I give a nod and curt smile to Uncle - as he rounds off a sentence or something similar - and walk over to a table nearer to the window. In this crowd, abundant black ties, special-bought dresses and smooth tablecloths are expected, alongside the mediocre personalities and creased faces masquerading as smiles. This might well be a good location, but nothing is guaranteed.

The window is one that reaches from floor to ceiling, essentially becoming a wall of the apartment which, in this case, allows for a view over our beloved city streets. I allow myself a glance into the reflection of the party which is seemingly happening mid-air, above the streets in front of me; Uncle is not plummeting to the concrete below, he's flashing his smarter-phone

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Time check. The client walks into the room exactly as expected: purple dress, pearl necklace, punctual. A good start. She attempts to lock eyes with me across the room, but I'm accustomed to finding my own visual path through the crowds. I'll see you when I'm ready to see you, miss. She is desperately trying to be nonchalant; a little embarrassing to watch in all truth, but to an untrained eye she is simply walking my way because she recognises me and wants to share a glass of 'chemical tramp 1976'.

'Noah! It's been...' she ventures.

'It certainly has. Take off the necklace and wrap it around your wrist. Tight.' She does as she's told. We each have our role to play here. She doesn't doubt that I know what I'm doing. Helpful. I affix a small clasp to the necklace to hold it tightly in place on her wrist. We only call them necklaces for the sake of convenience with clients, of course; most actual jewellery wouldn't be worth a fraction of the cost. What appear to be pearls on the necklace are actually tiny phials containing pheromones, hormones and other, recently-developed GM chemicals. Each necklace is tailor-made for the client, ensuring that the correct combination of substances in the correct measure can be precisely delivered in the exact quantities necessary for the intended outcome. We provide some 'set-menu' options that have long been popular, those linked to sexual attractiveness being - of course - timelessly appealing. But there has been a trend towards more custom-made necklaces, including finale deals, whereby a person has a few hours of utter ecstasy followed by a painless death. All available if you know the right people.

'My hand,' begins the client, 'it's...'

Her voice has an edge of panic. This is often the way with first time clients, which I determine her to be - there are no marks on her wrists. This lady's necklace has twenty-four pearls on it: big spender. Each pearl is worth two thousand at a flat rate, and this client has opted to include a few 'house specials' at three-thousand-five-hundred a pearl. We don't ask questions, but this timid, sparrow of a woman seems an unlikely client. I didn't have a hand in the preparation of this particular necklace, and therefore don't know much about the intended outcome. Tonight my job is to meet the client at the right location at the right time, then, as the contract says, '...handle any subsequent events, ensuring the contractual wishes of the client are met at every stage.' That last clause has been open to interpretation in the past, with some 'observers' - such

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the Jewellers can bring you illumination, pure physical pleasure; but equally so, a most agonising, raging, spluttering death should you fail to proceed as expected. The Jewellers are not only to be admired for their unequivocal talent for chemistry and biology, but also for their shrewd business skills and peerless control of a potentially chaotic underworld.

‘Can you feel that?’ I prick her now blue-ish, ring finger with my tie pin a few times. She stares at her hand.

‘Not...really.’

I take off the clasp holding the necklace in place and deftly reattach it at a different link, triggering the phials to plunge tiny syringes into her wrist. As the blood flows eagerly back into her arm, goes the theory, the drugs race with it, spreading to each eager cell without delay.

‘So what can I expect?’ It’s only now appropriate for me to ask, drugs having been administered – it means there’s no way for me to alter the dose.

‘I’m not sure,’ her voice breaks. She is unsure about the situation, but once she entered the room wearing the necklace the contract was sealed. Probably the ‘Glowing’ set-menu for this one. Glowing is most popular with older clients, and I calculate this lady’s age to about forty-eight. It is at the more mellow end of our range, enhancing dopamine production for a short period – but then there were those house specials on her necklace. Not Glowing then.

‘Which pearls did you ask for?’

‘I didn’t ask. My husband did.’

‘Is your husband here?’ For a moment I suspect Uncle, but he seems to be with his own wife now, arm round her waist, stiff as taxidermist creations like the other soul-bleached couples here. I fantasise that he is Noah’s father after all, cheating on his wife with her sister on every available weekend. It adds some colour to his personality; I like him better that way.

‘He said he wanted me to experience the first part alone - that he would see me later. Do you think he’s here?’ She starts to glance around the room, squinting and glaring in turn. I check her pupils for dilation.

‘I can’t say I’ve ever met him ma’am.’ I make sure I sound light-hearted: image is still everything.

‘You’re in stage one now. Stage one is where the contributors allow your body to take the next stage without nausea. You might feel wobbly though.’ I speak very clearly and slowly, but not

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'Shall we sit down ma'am?'

'Not...it's his party you see. Noah?' She continues to pinpoint and scrutinise each male face.

'Just here, ma'am.' This isn't the usual Glowing response. There would be more euphoria, hugging.

'There are angels here.' She whispers close to my ear, but too loud, like a drunk. I sense a tacky quality in her voice and her breath smells faintly of lavender. I mentally playback my observations from the last year, but can't recall a necklace with this combination of results. Focus. Uphold the contract. To the last syllable.

'They are so...beautiful.' Tears are streaming down the lines in her face, leaving inky trails, and she is gripping my arm with righteous intensity. I am not free to respond to 'Hallucinations, supposed manifestations, threats, accusations or utterances that would otherwise engage unnecessarily with the client.' I gently pat her arm.

With the third pat of her arm she gasps as if starved of air and drops to her knees, letting go of my arm. This naturally draws attention from Uncle and friends. Although the party is not quiet, the action is so melodramatic and the gasp so emotively-fuelled that several accusatory glances wash over me, lower limbs mechanically make motions towards us. One man watches attentively from the edge of his seat by the makeshift bar, eager to see what happens next. Well hello husband. Don't worry, I'll deal with this.

'Peggy!' I fall on my knees beside her, locking her in an embrace that both restricts her movements and the view of the guests. 'It's only right that you have the necklace. Mother loved you like a sister!' The fantasy does enough and all but the husband return their attention to their own makeshift realities. 'Peggy' is now sobbing, fountain-like on my shoulder.

She draws out a ragged breath, looks me dead in the eye: 'I saw God.'

Cold shudders its way down my spine and into my stomach. I drink the champagne. God.

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